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SENSITIVE
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EDUCATION FOR SECRETARY SPELLINGS; STATE FOR NEA/PD, NEA/ARP

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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR SECRETARY SPELLINGS TRIP TO OMAN
(OCT. 31-NOV. 2)

Introduction

¶1. (SBU) Madam Secretary: Embassy Muscat, my wife and I warmly welcome you to Oman. As one of our oldest friends in the region (the Omanis refer to their relationship with us as "strategic"), the Sultanate remains a trusted U.S. partner. This year marks the 175th anniversary of the U.S.-Oman "Treaty of Amity and Commerce," our second oldest treaty in the Middle East and North Africa. Thanks in part to the signing of the U.S.-Oman Free Trade Agreement in 2006, our economic relationship has grown deeper and opportunities for bilateral investment both here and in the U.S. have increased. In both education and in public diplomacy more broadly, our ties are strong and growing. The Sultanate recognizes the central role that education at all levels plays in the continuing development of the country, as well as its primacy in preparing youth (more than half the population) for life and work in what will have to be an increasingly diverse economy. Sultan Qaboos is Oman's most ardent advocate for education. Finally, the country is proud of its role as the host of this ministerial summit, and your presence, along with that of the other distinguished guests, is greatly appreciated as a sign of the seriousness of our commitment to strengthening international educational ties. End Introduction.

Domestic Politics

¶2. (SBU) As a result of the strong leadership and pro-Western views of Sultan Qaboos, the country's trade and maritime heritage, and generally tolerant religious views, Omanis are known for openness and moderation. The Sultan is one of the most intellectual leaders in the region and the country's commitment to improving its educational system reflects his own deep beliefs on the subject. His commitment to tolerance and opposition to division among religious or ethnic lines have resulted in the absence of sectarian or factional conflict. In 1996, the Sultan promulgated Oman's "Basic Law," which defines certain rights and privileges for all citizens and enshrines the role of the Majlis Oman, a two-chamber advisory body with limited legislative functions. Members of the upper house (the Majlis al-Dawla) are appointed by the Sultan; members of the lower house (the Majlis al-Shura) are directly elected by universal suffrage every four years. While the Majlis Oman can review and comment on draft laws and budgets, it cannot initiate or veto legislation. Political parties and interest groups are not allowed.

Education: Serving a Growing Populace

¶3. (SBU) The Omani education system is growing rapidly and struggling to keep up with the tremendous demands of Omani

youth. The first institution of higher learning, Sultan Qaboos University, opened its doors in 1986, and since then, over 40 other public and private post-secondary institutions have come online, in areas ranging from general undergraduate education to specialized programs in subjects from medicine to firefighting. Omanis, recognizing the opportunities that a good education and English-language skills offer in an increasingly globalized region, are testing the capacities of the education system to its max, not least because the majority of higher-education teaching is carried out in English. The Sultan places a strong emphasis on education and has financed the construction of several new campuses for public and private colleges and universities, as well as having the government underwrite scholarships for a significant percentage of the students in the private system.

14. (SBU) In a bid to modernize its primary and secondary education programs, the Ministry of Education launched a restructuring program in the late 1990's. This initiative divided primary and secondary education into two cycles (cycle one Grades I to IV, and cycle two Grades V to X) and post-secondary education (Grades XI and XII). Schools now begin exposing students to English language and IT skills from the outset, and the overall teaching methodology has shifted from rote to analytical learning. The first graduates of this newly structured system are just now graduating and entering post-secondary programs.

Partnership With the Ministry of Education

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15. (SBU) The Embassy and the Ministry of Education enjoy a strong relationship rooted in cooperation on several exchange and Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) programs. The Ministry is an enthusiastic partner in programs including:

- The English Access Microscholarship Program, which underwrites scholarships to lower-income students to study English in a two-year, part-time supplement to the state curriculum;
- The Youth Exchange and Study (YES) program, which has sent over 35 Omani secondary (Grade X) students to the U.S. for a full academic year;
- The Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant Program (FLTA), in which over 45 Omani teachers from the Ministry have taught Arabic in U.S. colleges and universities for a year;
- MEPI's Partnership Schools Project (PSP), which introduced teacher training in Child Centered Methodology (CCM), Principal Leadership Training (PLT), development of an online teacher training portal (ICM), and development of a 'Life Skills' curriculum;
- The MEPI Scholarship Program, a partnership between the Ministry and embassy-affiliated The American International School of Muscat (TAISM) providing 8 scholarships to Omani high school students for grades 7 to 12;
- MEPI's Arab Civitas Program, a broad-based introduction to concepts including responsible citizenship and civic participation, which aims to marginalize extremism and re-enforce the Sultanate's culture of openness, tolerance, and moderation.

The U.S. a Model for Higher Education

16. (SBU) Links between U.S. and Omani higher education are strong. Many private colleges and institutions have various kinds of cooperative programs with American institutions, ranging from occasional consultation on curriculum and quality assurance to founding partnerships that have benefited the Omani side enormously. Some of the most successful of these include a linkage between the private Modern College of Business and Science in Muscat and the University of Missouri) Saint Louis, the partnership

between the Oman College of Nursing and Villanova University, and a long-standing relationship between the Oman Medical College and West Virginia University. Oman does not currently have a U.S.-branded presence in higher education (such as those in Qatar's Education City or the George Mason University campus in the UAE), but there are projects at various stages that might bring at least one U.S. university to the Sultanate as a founding partner in a new Omani university. American expertise, whether through USG programs such as Fulbright or through private hires, is much in demand, and American academics regularly report high levels of satisfaction with their Omani host institutions.

Free Trade Agreement

¶17. (SBU) Over two years have passed since the President and the Sultan signed the U.S.-Oman Free Trade Agreement (FTA), but the trade deal has yet to enter into force as Oman underestimated the amount of legislative, regulatory, technical and administrative work required to fully comply with the Agreement's many provisions. The just-concluded visits by Ambassador Susan Schwab, the U.S. Trade Representative, and by Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte, have done much to help resolve remaining issues and we hope to achieve implementation by the end of the year.

Trafficking in Persons

¶18. (SBU) The Omani government strongly objected to its Tier 3 (lowest possible) ranking in the 2008 State Department Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report. Senior Omanis felt betrayed by the report, which they believed blackened the country's image. The Sultanate subsequently took several steps against TIP and on October 20, as part of the process of closing out the 2008 TIP report, the White House released a Presidential Determination that returned Oman to the Tier 2 Watch List. The Omani government has reacted positively to this upgrade and has indicated that it is ready to leave behind this unpleasant but brief chapter in our otherwise strong bilateral relationship.

Weathering the Global Financial Crisis

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¶19. (SBU) Government officials have repeatedly stated to the press that Oman's economy has not been affected by the global financial crisis. However, the Sultanate's stock market dropped by almost 40% over the last five months while its banking system, formerly flush with cash, is now facing difficulties in accessing credit from external sources for the financing of real estate construction. Even with much tighter credit, a sharp market downturn and lower oil prices, Oman's economic growth, which eclipsed 12% in 2007, should continue thanks to government spending on big infrastructure and development projects. We have not to date seen any wavering in the Sultanate's substantial financial commitment to continue enhancing and expanding primary, secondary, and tertiary education.

Oman and the MENA Ministerial

¶10. (SBU) Madam Secretary, Embassy Muscat looks forward to your visit to one of the Arab world's more unique and most stable countries. Your hosts will be eager to showcase Oman's achievements not only in education but in many other areas of development during the MENA Ministerial. Despite significant challenges both in scope and in quality assurance, they have much to be proud of. In comparison to some other educational and governmental systems in the Arab world, Oman's are well administered, focused on results that

benefit Omani citizens, and reflective of international standards and best practices. For a system that literally did not exist thirty years ago, the fact that education in particular plays such a central role in Omani life is a signal achievement.

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